

MMS Alaska OCS Region

Focus Sheet

Environmental Studies Program

The MMS's Environmental Studies Program provides information addressing environmental, social, and economic concerns used in making decisions about selection of areas for leasing, exploration, development, environmental assessment, mitigation, and monitoring. Since the ESP began, more than \$658 million has been spent nationally. In Alaska, more than \$261 million has funded projects in 15 OCS planning areas in the Arctic, Bering Sea, and Gulf of Alaska subregions.

THE PUBLIC AND OTHER ALASKA AGENCIES PARTICIPATE IN THE ESP:

Public input and partnerships with other agencies are an important aspect of the Alaska ESP. For example, a draft of the Alaska Region Environmental Strategic Studies Plan is distributed for review each year to approximately 200 Native, environmental, industry, international, and other organizations, Federal, State, and Local governments; and the MMS Scientific Committee. Comments received from these stakeholders as well as the general public are taken into consideration in identifying needed studies.

Local government leaders, sources of traditional knowledge, environmental groups, oil and fishing industry personnel, studies contractors, and other scientists and specialists from Federal, State, and local agencies help the MMS to identify environmental issues and information needs. They help the MMS by commenting at scoping meetings before preparation of environmental impact statements, and by attending periodic regional Information Transfer Meetings and workshops.

The ITM's are convened to bring together information from all possible sources. The overlap of knowledge shared among participants in focused workshops result in a synthesis of information that supports EIS analyses and also identifies needed studies.

SCIENTIFIC STUDIES ARE CONDUCTED IN PARTNERSHIP WITH OTHERS:

The Beaufort Sea and Lower Cook Inlet are among the areas of primary interest for oil and gas exploration and development. The following two examples of cooperative agreements for studies conducted in these areas will add to the knowledge base shared by MMS and the State.

Cooperative Agreement with the Coastal Marine Institute:

In 1993, the MMS developed a Coastal Marine Institute (CMI) to take advantage of the environmental scientific expertise at local levels. Under a 5-year Cooperative Agreement with the University of Alaska, the MMS committed \$1 million per year for studies to be conducted by the CMI if it can obtain matching funds. Currently, 14 multi-disciplinary studies are underway. The University of Alaska Fairbanks School of Fisheries and Ocean Sciences, nationally renowned for its coastal and marine expertise, manages the CMI. In addition to funding the CMI scientific research, 9 percent of the MMS's \$1 million contribution supports education in Alaska by funding tuition and travel for UAF graduate student research related to CMI projects.

Cooperative Agreement for a Study of Ringed Seals:

The MMS is also working under a Cooperative Agreement with the Alaska Department of Fish and Game on a \$532,800 multi-year ringed seal study. The ADF & G will review and refine the protocols for monitoring ringed seals by aerial surveys, compare the abundance and density of molting ringed seals on fast ice in the Beaufort Sea during 1996-1998 with data collected from 1985-1987, and determine ringed seal abundance near industrial operations in comparison with otherwise comparable non-industrial areas.

Information obtained from this study will help assure that the MMS has adequate data for evaluating potential industry effects and that residents of coastal Beaufort Sea communities have a sustainable resource of harvestable ringed seals.

Cooperation and Coordination with Local Communities

Several studies are in or near coastal communities and special effort is made to keep communities informed about studies in their area. In many past and several ongoing studies, local communities and organizations have helped to plan, initiate, and review environmental studies. For example, an ongoing study "Bowhead Whale Feeding in the Eastern Alaskan Beaufort Sea: Update of Scientific and Traditional Information" has worked closely with the Kaktovik Whaling Captain's Association. The ongoing study "Collection of Traditional Knowledge of the Alaskan North Slope" will utilize information and reviews by community elders.

THE ALASKA OCS REGION CONDUCTS OTHER STUDIES:

In 2001, the Alaska ESP also will directly contract for and provide technical oversight to about 30 ongoing studies in addition to the 14 CMI studies. Non-MMS scientists conduct most of these studies

MONITORING STUDIES

MMS monitors in the vicinity of ongoing or past oil and gas activities to determine if there have been any long term changes in the productivity or quality of the potentially affected environment. A large proportion of Alaska environmental studies are designed to provide or contribute to monitoring information such as:

- Bowhead Whale Aerial Survey Project (BWASP)
- Arctic Nearshore Impact Monitoring in Development Area (ANIMIDA, see ANIMIDA Focus Sheet)
- Alaska Marine Mammals Tissue Archival Project
- Seabird Samples as Resources for Marine Environmental Assessment
- Environmental Sensitivity Index Shoreline Classification in the Beaufort Sea
- Synthesis and Collection of Meteorological Data in the Nearshore Beaufort Sea
- Historical Changes in Trace Metals and Hydrocarbons, Beaufort Sea Inner Shelf
- Alaska Frozen Tissue Collection and Electronic Database
- Alaska Sea Ice Atlas
- Correction Factor for Ringed Seal Surveys in Northern Alaska

The BWASP locates and counts bowhead and beluga whales and other incidental marine mammals in the bowhead migration corridor in coordination with Inupiat subsistence hunters, the National Marine Fisheries Service, and the oil industry. The BWASP also provides sea-ice data to the U.S. Naval Ice Center for ground-truthing satellite imagery of Beaufort Sea ice conditions, and whale migration data to the Alaska Eskimo Whaling Commission for use in managing their fall subsistence whale hunt. In addition to determining whether there are changes in the migration axis, the MMS can use project information to implement seasonal drilling restrictions and limitations on geological and geophysical exploration if needed. The BWASP will continue to add bowhead whale distribution and abundance information to the substantial database collected over the last 21 years.

The Environmental Studies Program Information System, or ESPIS, is a searchable database of studies reports funded by MMS since 1973. ESPIS may be accessed via the Internet at www.mms.gov/eppd/index.

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For More Information

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